

Monday 12/14/20

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Researchers Use 3D Technology to Reconstruct Brain of Dinosaur, Gain Insight Into Habits
by [Mary F.](#)

The Thecodontosaurus is a genus of basal sauropodomorph dinosaur that lived during the late Triassic period, which occurred between 251 million and 199 million years ago. The Sauropodomorpha were a clade of long-necked and herbivorous dinosaurs.

In a [new study published Monday](#) in the Zoological Journal of the Linnean Society, researchers at the University of Bristol used advanced imaging and 3D-modeling techniques to digitally reconstruct the brain of the Thecodontosaurus, which is also known as the Bristol dinosaur, since its fossil bones were first uncovered in 1834 in Bristol, England.

According to the researchers, the endocranial reconstructions, which were generated from CT scans, revealed important Thecodontosaurus characteristics, namely that the species walked on two legs and was cursorial, which means that it adapted specifically to run.

"Our analysis of Thecodontosaurus' brain uncovered many fascinating features, some of which were quite surprising. Whereas its later relatives moved around ponderously on all fours, our findings suggest this species may have walked on two legs and been occasionally carnivorous," Antonio Ballell, lead author of the study, said in a [Monday news release by the University of Bristol](#).

The 3D models also shed light on the animal's floccular lobes, which are part of the cerebellum and play a role in the maintenance of balance equilibrium and muscle tone.

"Even though the actual brain is long gone, the software allows us to recreate brain and inner ear shape via the dimensions of the cavities left behind. The braincase of Thecodontosaurus is beautifully preserved so we compared it to other dinosaurs, identifying common features and some that are specific to Thecodontosaurus," Ballell explained.

"Its brain cast even showed the detail of the floccular lobes, located at the back of the brain, which are important for balance. Their large size indicate [sic] it was bipedal. This structure is also associated with the control of balance and eye and neck movements, suggesting Thecodontosaurus was relatively agile and could keep a stable gaze while moving fast," he added.

The reconstruction of the inner ears also allowed researchers to determine that the Thecodontosaurus could hear better compared to other animals. In fact, its hearing frequency was relatively high, suggesting that it could "recognize varied squeaks and honks from different animals," the news release explains.

Although the animal's diet has long been debated, the scans reveal that the parts of the brain linked to keeping the head, eyes and gaze steady during movement were well-developed, which suggest that Thecodontosaurus could catch prey, Ballell noted.

However, the researchers' analysis also found that the dinosaur's tooth morphology indicated that plants were a main component of its diet.

"It's possible it adopted omnivorous habits," Ballell noted.

Mike Benton, study co-author, also applauded the 3D technology used during the research.

"It's great to see how new technologies are allowing us to find out even more about how this little dinosaur lived more than 200 million years ago," Benton said. "We began working on Thecodontosaurus in 1990, and it is the emblem of the Bristol Dinosaur Project, an educational outreach scheme where students go to speak about science in local schools. We're very fortunate to have so many well-preserved fossils of such an important dinosaur here in Bristol. This has helped us understand many aspects of the biology of Thecodontosaurus, but there are still many questions about this species yet to be explored".

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'Just Inches From Success': DARPA's Gremlin Swarming Drone Fails on Mothership Return Test

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Semi-autonomous drone swarms are the next step in unmanned aerial vehicles, but getting the machines to function individually, much less in unison, has proven challenging so far for the Pentagon.

During a recent flight test, scientists at the US' Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and Dynetics failed to reconnect any of the three X-61A Gremlins Air Vehicles (GAV) to the C-130 Hercules "mothership," a vital function in making the swarming drones functional as war weapons.

In a recent news release, [DARPA noted the effort was "just inches from success"](#) after the three semi-autonomous drones couldn't hook up to the retractable "bullet" towed behind the C-130 mothership, which is how the drones are retrieved at the end of their mission.

The Gremlins made nine attempts, but "relative movement was more dynamic than expected," DARPA said - in other words, there was too much turbulence behind the large, prop-driven C-130 cargo plane bouncing the plug around for the Gremlins to make the connection. Since they have no ability to land on their own, the GAVs deployed emergency parachutes and floated down instead.

"All of our systems looked good during the ground tests, but the flight test is where you truly find how things work," Scott Wierzbanski, the Gremlins Program Manager in DARPA's Tactical Technology Office, said in the release. "We came within inches of connection on each attempt but, ultimately, it just wasn't close enough to engage the recovery system."

Dynetics [flew a Gremlin for the first time in November 2019](#), a test that demonstrated the basics of its functioning, but in which it was also destroyed after its parachute failed to deploy and it plummeted into the ground at full speed.

[According to a Dynetics fact sheet, the nimble drones](#) are 14 feet long with two folding wings that reach an 11.4-foot wingspan, or roughly the size of a cruise missile. A jet engine can power them at up to Mach 0.6, and they can carry up to 145 pounds of ordnance for missions including electro-optical or infrared imaging, laser spotting, electronic warfare or even "kinetic" attack.

They are intended to become semi-autonomous or fully autonomous, communicating with other Gremlins in their "swarm" to carry out missions.

However, the Gremlins aren't the Pentagon's only option for developing an aircraft-borne drone: in September, General Atomics, which makes some of the Pentagon's staple unmanned aerial vehicles like the Predator and Reaper drones, [introduced its Sparrowhawk, which is unique](#) in that its mothership would be another drone.

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Trump Announces Attorney General Bill Barr 'Will Be Leaving Just Before Christmas' by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As the results of the US Electoral College votes were announced on Monday, US President Donald Trump said Attorney General William Barr would no longer be heading the US Department of Justice after the Christmas holiday.

Trump and Barr have increasingly butted heads in recent weeks, not only over the DoJ chief's [silence about an ongoing investigation into Hunter Biden](#), son of Trump's election rival Joe Biden, but also Barr's conclusion that [there was no evidence of widespread voter fraud](#) in the November 3 election, [as Trump has long claimed](#).

On Monday afternoon, [as the US Electoral College delegates cast their votes](#) for president on behalf of the US states and made Biden's election official, Trump tweeted that Barr's service in his administration was finished.

"Just had a very nice meeting with Attorney General Bill Barr at the White House. Our relationship has been a very good one, he has done an outstanding job! As per letter, Bill will be leaving just before Christmas to spend the holidays with his family," Trump tweeted.

Trump noted that Deputy Attorney General Jeff Rosen will be stepping up to become acting attorney general for the last month of his presidency, and Rosen's office will be filled by Richard Donoghue, his principal deputy.

In a letter tweeted by Trump, Barr hailed the successes of Trump's four years as president, although he was only attorney general for less than half of that time. However, he was short on the details behind his early departure, saying only that he would spend the next few weeks wrapping up important matters and depart "as discussed."

Barr is just the latest Trump administration official to depart in the time between Election Day and Inauguration Day, which is January 20, 2021. Other figures who have lost their jobs early have been [former Defense Secretary Mark Esper](#) and former head of the [Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency Christopher Krebs](#). Both men were sacked due to prior disagreements with Trump: Esper for a dispute over renaming US bases named after Confederate figures, and Krebs for a statement similar to Barr's, noting a lack of evidence for foreign interference in the November 3 election.

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California Sues Amazon for Ignoring COVID-19 Worker Safety Subpoenas
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While Amazon claims its safety enhancements have reduced COVID-19 transmission in its facilities, stories have emerged about inadequate safety practices and indifference from management, and the retail giant has dodged attempts to audit its safety measures by the US state of California.

The Golden State has brought a lawsuit against internet retail giant Amazon for failing to comply with subpoenas for information about worker safety at their facilities across the state. [The suit was filed Monday in the California Superior Court](#) in Sacramento.

[According to a Monday news release](#), Amazon has ignored investigative subpoenas filed on August 19 seeking information about the extent and nature of the company's COVID-19 prevention efforts, including sick leave policies, cleaning procedures and raw data on the number of infections and deaths at its facilities in California. The suit notes that California Attorney General Xavier Becerra has been pursuing the information since May.

"Amazon has made billions during this pandemic relying on the labor of essential workers. Their workers get the job done while putting themselves at risk," Becerra said in the release. "It's critical to know if these workers are receiving the protections on the job that they are entitled to under the law. Time is of the essence. Amazon has delayed responding adequately to our investigative requests long enough. We're seeking a court order to compel Amazon to comply fully with our investigative subpoenas."

[According to the state's coronavirus tracking website](#), 1.58 million Californians have contracted COVID-19, and 21,046 people have died. On Sunday, 33,278 new cases were recorded, and 77 people died. [A new stay-at-home order went into effect](#) earlier this month, but unlike the mass social lockdowns seen in the spring, factories and warehouses are not closing their doors.

Amazon has boasted of its safety efforts, [including "testing regularly and broadly"](#) and introducing or changing 150 processes to improve safety. In October, the company claimed a comparison of its data to that collected by Johns Hopkins University showed a 42% lower infection rate than the general population. The company has 1.3 million employees.

[In a Sunday op-ed in The Guardian](#), former US Secretary of Labor Robert Reich decried what he called Amazon's "Scrooge capitalism," a reference to the infamously parsimonious main character of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."

He described a recent email from a worker at a Amazon's Whole Foods delivery warehouse in Industry City, Brooklyn, New York, who described how in the last six weeks, six of her co-workers had tested positive for COVID-19 because of a total lack of concern for basic safety practices like social distancing. When they bring up their concerns with management, they are either castigated or offered a leave of absence without pay.

The US' Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the agency responsible for monitoring and enforcing safety practices in workplaces across the country, seems to be asleep

at the wheel: Reich noted it has received more than 10,000 complaints of unsafe conditions during the pandemic, but issued just two citations.

California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health handed Amazon a fine for failing to provide adequate safety features at two of its California facilities, but that fine was just \$1,870, [according to the Los Angeles Times](#), which noted it was the smallest fine the state agency had ever given a business for a COVID-19 violation.

"Decades ago, employees in most large corporations could remedy unsafe working conditions by complaining to their union, which pressured their employer to fix the problems, or to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (founded in 1970), which levied fines," Reich wrote. "Alternatively, they could embarrass their companies by going public with their complaints. As a last resort, they could sue."

"None of these routes is readily available to Amazon warehouse workers – nor, for that matter, to warehouse workers at Walmart, or to most workers in other super-spreader COVID workplaces such as meatpacking plants and nursing homes," he added. "Amazon's workers have no union. Throughout its 25-year history, the corporation has aggressively fought union organizing."

On that count, at least, Reich appears to be wrong. Amazon was also previously sued in October by workers at a Staten Island, New York, facility, [who noted the company had not been "honest and forthcoming"](#) in its supposed compliance with another previous court order in June against punishing workers as an incentive to maximize productivity.

[In September, international charity Oxfam noted](#) that Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, already the world's richest man with an estimated \$180 billion in wealth, has made so much money since the pandemic began that he could give every Amazon employee a \$105,000 bonus and still be as rich as he was beforehand.

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US Northeast to Get Blasted by Winter Storm Bringing Heavy Snow, Powerful Winds
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Forecasters are predicting that a weather system, since dubbed Winter Storm Gail, may dump multiple inches of snow and possibly become one of the biggest snow and ice storms to strike the US Northeast in several years.

Meteorologists issued a wide-ranging set of winter storm watches and advisories on Monday ahead of Winter Storm Gail's anticipated arrival in the region, which is expected to start late Tuesday and last into Thursday in some areas.

Although there are some uncertain factors, such as how strong the cold air to roll in may be, meteorologists have stated that light snow and sleet or freezing rain may develop late Tuesday over parts of North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia before significant amounts of snow begin to fall in Washington, DC, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York and Massachusetts.

[According to The Weather Channel](#), snowfall totals in areas spanning from West Virginia to southern New England may reach a foot or more, but will certainly reach at least 6 inches. Some snow totals may not be quite as heavy due to the potential mixture of sleet and rain. “The potential for heavier snow in the major East Coast cities will largely depend on the exact track of the storm and the strength of low-level cold air,” the outlet explains, adding that initial mixes of sleet and rain may “slowly change to rain” by Wednesday afternoon.

By [AccuWeather’s estimates](#) some areas under storm advisories may see between 24 inches and 30 inches of snow dumped on them. Additionally, the region is expected to be hit with strong winds that may hit speeds of 60 mph.

“Northern New Jersey and the lower Hudson Valley of New York state through southern New England is the most likely zone to experience near-blizzard and whiteout conditions,” Alex Sosnowski, senior meteorologist at AccuWeather, notes.

“In this area, winds can frequently gust between 40 and 50 mph, dropping the visibility to near-zero at times at the height of the storm Wednesday night into Thursday morning.”

Sosnowski further noted that the winter storm “will almost certainly surpass the entirety of last winter’s snowfall totals for major cities such as Washington, DC, Philadelphia and New York City in one fell swoop.” Snowfall totals recorded at the three cities reached a whopping 11.1 inches. Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D-NY) [urged residents during a Monday briefing](#) to “not only monitor their local weather reports for updates, but start preparing their homes, their families and themselves for heavy snow as well.”

While some communities may not experience snow, forecasters are warning that the wintry mix may prompt ice storms in western North Carolina and in Virginia. With a projected ice glaze of up to 0.25 inches, officials have sounded off that power outages may emerge as a result. Those hoping for a white Christmas may be in luck, according to AccuWeather meteorologist Tyler Roys, who indicated that “it could also turn a bit more active again” next week.

By the outlet’s count, the last snowstorm to batter the Northeast [over the Christmas holiday](#) unfolded in 2010 and brought between 12 and 32 inches of snow across the region. The 2010 storm became so intense that [all three major airports](#) in the New York metropolitan area were shuttered.

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Video: US Health Expert Fauci Warns COVID-19 Vaccine is No Substitute for Preventative Measures

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The rollout of the US’ first vaccine for the novel coronavirus began Monday as the first batch of doses was administered to health care workers and nursing home employees. The development came just days after the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) granted an emergency use authorization for Pfizer’s vaccine.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the head of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases who also serves as a member of the White House coronavirus task force, urged Americans on

Monday against sidestepping preventative COVID-19 measures in light of the new vaccine that is being deployed across the US.

Fauci noted in an interview with MSNBC that "a vaccine right now is not a substitute for the normal, standard public health measures of wearing a mask, keeping your distance, avoiding congregate crowded sections and particularly indoors."

"It's not a substitute; it complements it," he stressed.

The prominent health professional further explained that preventative measures are not likely to be eased until "the level of infection in society [drops] so low that it's no longer a public health threat."

In terms of when Americans might expect the US to return to pre-coronavirus living standards, Fauci indicated that he doesn't expect such a change until the second half of 2021, but that it could happen sometime later as well. He also suggested that COVID-19 vaccines may be widely available to the majority of Americans by spring 2021, depending on the "efficiency of the rollout."

"By the time we get to the fall, we can start approaching some degree of relief where the level of infection will be so low in society we can start essentially approaching some form of normality," he [told MSNBC host Hallie Jackson](#).

Fauci's remarks come as the first doses of Pfizer and BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine were deployed across the US on Monday after the FDA issued an [emergency use authorization](#) to the pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies on Friday.

The Pfizer vaccine has a proven 95% efficacy against COVID-19 and requires individuals to take two separate 30-microgram doses 21 days apart.

The deal between the US federal government and Pfizer is to supply some 100 million doses of the vaccine by next March, of which some 3 million are due to be dispensed as the first batch to medical responders and nursing home staffers and residents, [according to the New York Times](#). With a [test positivity ratio of 11.42%](#), the US is seeing cases rising in California, Tennessee, New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio. The [US death toll topped 300,000 on Monday](#) as more than 190,000 new COVID-19 cases were reported. The [COVID Tracking Project reports](#) that 109,331 Americans were hospitalized as of Sunday, of which 21,231 have been admitted to intensive care units.

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US Agency Reveals Utah Mink is First Wild Animal to Contract COVID-19
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Outbreaks of the novel coronavirus virus have been detected in animals before in the US and abroad; however, in the majority of cases, pet cats and dogs only managed to contract SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, after being in contact with an infected human. A [recent alert issued by the US Department of Agriculture](#) revealed that a "free-ranging, wild mink" located in Utah contracted COVID-19 and became the first documented wild animal to become infected with the respiratory disease.

Officials discovered the COVID-19-positive animal during surveillance operations on grounds surrounding mink farms in Utah, Michigan and in Wisconsin - states where a [total of 16 mink farms](#) had reported outbreaks of the virus.

The surveillance operations took place between August 24 and October 30, and saw the involvement of the US Geological Survey, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and State Departments of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Health.

The project was being conducted to determine whether the virus can be spread to nearby wildlife away from the infected mink farms.

"There is currently no evidence that SARS-CoV-2 is circulating or has been established in wild populations surrounding the infected mink farms," reads the alert. "Several animals from different wildlife species were sampled, but all others tested negative."

"The sequence of the viral genome obtained from the wild mink sample at NVSL [National Veterinary Services Laboratories] was indistinguishable from those obtained from the farmed mink," the advisory added.

Officials have referred the discovery to the World Organization for Animal Health.

The discovery comes as authorities in Denmark were [forced to kill millions of farmed mink](#) after concerns emerged that the animals were contracting COVID-19 from infected farms. The ordeal saw the country's [agricultural minister step down from his post](#) after it was found that the government did not have the legal basis to issue such an order.

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Video: Pence's Prancing Jog Garners Giggles From Netizens
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US Vice President Mike Pence spoke at the "Defend the Majority" rally at the Augusta Regional Airport in Augusta, Georgia, on Thursday, but it was his entrance to the event – not his speech – that ended up catching the eye of countless netizens.

Pence arrived in Augusta around 2:00 p.m. local time on Thursday to join Sens. Kelly Loeffler (R-GA) and David Perdue (R-GA) at the "Defend the Majority" rally.

Perdue and Loeffler are presently involved in runoff races against Democrats Jon Ossoff and Rev. Raphael Warnock, respectively. GOP losses in both January 5 runoff races would give Democrat and Republican lawmakers a 50-50 Senate split.

While all eyes have been on Georgia for its upcoming runoff elections, netizens took a brief break from politics on Thursday when they noticed that Pence had a little pep in his step when approaching the podium.

During the rally, the US vice president repeatedly invoked God and described the senators' Democratic challengers as supporters of a "socialist" agenda.

"We need to send them back because the Republican majority could be the last line of defense to preserve all we've done to defend this nation, revive our economy and preserve the God-given liberties we hold dear."

He even appeared to say that God was on the GOP candidates' sides.

"With the support of people all across this state, and with God's help, we're going to keep on winning," Pence said. "We will win Georgia and save America."
Monday marks the first day of early voting in the state.

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Over 1.2 Million Georgia Voters Request Mail-In Ballots Ahead of Critical Senate Runoff Elections
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Early voting for Georgia's Senate runoff elections began on Monday. While runoff races have historically resulted in weaker voter participation, Georgia residents are positioned to cast a historic number of ballots in the January 5, 2021, election.

As of December 14, registered voters in Georgia have filed at least 1,229,917 absentee ballot requests, according to [US Elections Project data](#). Total requests account for 16.1% of registered voters.

Additionally, more than 260,000 mail-in ballots have already been accepted by the state. Ballots for the critical January 5 runoff elections feature Republican Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler against Democrats Jon Ossoff and Rev. Raphael Warnock, respectively. The second round of voting comes after none of the Senate candidates secured a majority of the vote in their relevant races.

Ossoff barely bested Perdue [48.5% to 47.5%](#) and Warnock narrowly led Loeffler 48.5% to 46.9% following the November 3 general election.

Georgia's Senate runoff elections will be the deciding factor in which party controls the legislative chamber. Presently, Republicans - led by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) - hold a 50-48 majority in the Senate.

In the event that both Ossoff and Warnock win their races, Democrats and Republicans would have 50-50 Senate representation. Following the January 20 inauguration, presumed Vice President Kamala Harris holds the power to settle any tie-breaker votes.

Georgia Democrat Stacey Abrams, leader of the grassroots voting rights organization Fair Fight, told "CBS This Morning" host Gayle King on Monday that she believes the Senate runoffs will bring a "turnout unlike anything Georgia has seen."

According to the former state lawmaker, at least 85,000 absentee ballot requests have come from Americans who did not participate in the November 3 presidential election.

Abrams noted that a disproportionate number of people requesting absentee ballots are between the ages of 18 and 29 years old. Additionally, an overwhelming amount of mail-in ballot requests have come from people of color.

Early, in-person votes [accounted for more than half](#) of the record 5 million ballots cast in the November 3 general election.

Loeffler and Perdue have received hefty support from US President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence in recent days.

Pence [told attendees of the "Defend the Majority" rally](#) in Augusta, Georgia, on Thursday that winning the upcoming elections and maintaining the GOP's control of the Senate could be the "last line of defense" in defending the nation, reviving the economy and preserving "the God-given liberties we hold dear."

Trump Takes Aim at Georgia Governor Over Signature Verification

The US president took a more targeted approach on Sunday, slamming Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, a Republican, as a "fool" and a "clown" for not calling a special session of the state's General Assembly to further enforce signature verification on mail-in ballots. While Georgia's election laws were passed by the Republican-controlled legislature, Trump claims Kemp's failure to call a special session could result in a "bad day" for Loeffler and Perdue in January. Rep. Doug Collins (R-GA), a notable Trump ally, has issued similar complaints about the state's election laws, [arguing to Newsmax TV](#) that the consent decree regarding signature matching "gutted [Georgia's] verification process" for mail-in ballots.

The decree was implemented by Republican Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger earlier this year to resolve a [signature matching lawsuit](#) filed by Democrats. Raffensperger's office has maintained that the US president's assessment of the matter is "flat out, 100 percent, four square wrong."

"The consent decree literally – all we did was send out an 'official election bulletin,' telling people, 'Hey follow our rules and how we already do signature match,'" [explained Gabriel Sterling](#), Raffensperger's voting systems implementation manager. The consent decree allows voters to fix their ballots if a signature mismatch is identified.

Nevertheless, the Republican National Committee, Georgia Republican Party and other GOP plaintiffs [have filed three separate lawsuits](#) against Georgia's secretary of state.

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Less Than Half of Canadians Say Will Get Immunized Against Coronavirus Right Away - Poll

TORONTO, December 14 (Sputnik) - Fewer than half of Canadians say they will get vaccinated against the novel coronavirus when the vaccine becomes available, an Angus Reid Institute poll revealed.

"Half of Canadians (48 percent) now say they would get the vaccine as soon as it became available," the polling firm said on Monday.

The Angus Reid Institute said an additional 31 percent of Canadians intend to take a wait-and-see approach, while 14 percent have indicated they will not get vaccinated at all as apprehension concerning the safety of the vaccine has increased during the fall.

Of Canadians who insist they will not be immunized, 70 percent cite fears about potential long-term side effects, while 39 percent lack trust in the vaccine saying that the approval process has been rushed.

Vaccination against the coronavirus in Canada began on Monday, with Anita Quidangen, a personal support worker in a long-term care home in Toronto, receiving the country's first shot.

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California Begins Vaccination Against Coronavirus on Monday - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US state of California will begin vaccinating its residents against the novel coronavirus on Monday, Governor Gavin Newsom said in a statement.

"Hope has arrived," Newsom said on Monday evening. "As our first doses of vaccine arrive, the promise of ending the pandemic is on the horizon."

Newsom urged all 58 counties in the state to take coordinated inclusive actions to get residents vaccinated.

"There is light at the end of the tunnel and I am calling on all Californians to do our part to get us through this - wear a mask, reduce mixing, stay home, stop the spread and save lives," he said. Moncef Slaoui, chief adviser to the US COVID-19 vaccine program, said the United States hopes to give out the vaccine, developed by Pfizer under a joint-venture with Germany's BioNTech, to 100 million Americans by the spring of 2021.

On Tuesday, the FDA said in a draft briefing document there are more than 20 possible side effects from taking the Pfizer vaccine, including death, stroke, heart attack, meningitis, encephalitis, autoimmune diseases, narcolepsy and others. The FDA also said that six people have died during the vaccine trials.

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US Upgrades COVID-19 Travel Health Warnings for Georgia, Kosovo - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US government has upgraded its COVID-19 travel warnings for US citizens and advises them not to visit Georgia and Kosovo, the Department of State said in a media note.

"This week, the following Travel Advisories have been assessed and reissued with updates, raised to a Level 4 - Do Not Travel: Georgia, Kosovo," the note said on Monday.

The State Department has also reissued and confirmed its Level 3 advisory to reconsider travel to Uruguay, Eswatini and Mozambique, the note also said.

"[T]he Department of State regularly assesses and updates our Travel Advisories, based on current US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Travel Notices and the current conditions in country," the note added.

The CDC recently updated its public Travel Health Notices for COVID-19, according to the note.

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US Attorney General Barr Resigning, Rosen Will Take Over Post - Trump

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General William Barr will leave his post in ten days and Deputy Attorney General Jeff Rosen will become Acting Attorney General, President Donald Trump said in a statement.

"Just had a very nice meeting with Attorney General Bill Barr at the White House," Trump said via Twitter on Monday evening. "Our relationship has been a very good one, he has done an outstanding job! As per letter, Bill will be leaving just before Christmas to spend the holidays with his family."

Barr specified in the letter that he will leave the post on December 23.

Barr also said the Justice Department will continue to review allegations of election and voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election.

Earlier in December, US media reported that Barr has decided to leave his position and that Trump had no influence on Barr's decision.

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US Attorney General Barr Resigning, Rosen Will Take Over Post - Trump

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"Just had a very nice meeting with Attorney General Bill Barr at the White House," Trump said via Twitter on Monday. "Our relationship has been a very good one, he has done an outstanding job! As per letter, Bill will be leaving just before Christmas to spend the holidays with his family."

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California Awards 55 Electoral Votes, US Presidency to Biden

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US state of California handed its 55 electoral votes to Joe Biden pushing the Democratic nominee over the threshold of 270 electoral votes needed to win the presidential election.

Biden leads the Republican incumbent Donald Trump 302 to 232 after 49 states and the District of Columbia completed their Electoral College meetings on Monday with no "faithless" votes recorded.

The state of Hawaii will cast its electoral votes later in the day.

A candidate must win 270 electoral votes out of the available 538 electoral votes to become US President.

The electoral votes will be sent to the US Congress for verification at a joint session, the final stage of the election, scheduled for January 6. Federal lawmakers can raise objections given that the Trump disputes the election claiming fraud and acts of impropriety robbed him of victory, but it would take a bicameral majority to carry out a dissenting opinion.

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Republicans in US Hold Alternative Electoral Vote for Trump

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Republicans in multiple states in the United States, including in Georgia, have held alternative electoral voting and given their votes to incumbent President Donald Trump as a symbolic gesture to challenge President-elect Joe Biden's win. "Because the President's lawsuit contesting the Georgia election is still pending, the Republican nominees for Presidential Elector met today at noon at the State Capitol today and cast their votes for President and Vice President," Georgia Republican leader David Shafer said via Twitter on Monday.

Georgia is a focal point of Trump's bid to legally challenge what he has called a massive election and voter fraud as well as acts of impropriety that has robbed him of victory. The official slate of Georgia's electors was formed by the Democrats and it reaffirmed Biden's victory. Such meetings by Republican electors have also taken place in Arizona, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan.

As of Monday afternoon, Biden leads Trump 240 to 232 in the Electoral College as more US states cast their electoral votes. According to the CNN tally, 47 states and the District of Columbia have completed their Electoral College meetings.

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California Awards 55 Electoral Votes, US Presidency to Biden

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US state of California handed its 55 electoral votes, the largest prize of the campaign, to Joe Biden pushing the Democratic candidate over a threshold needed to secure an overall victory in the presidential race.

Biden leads the Republican incumbent Donald Trump 302 to 232 after 49 states and the District of Columbia completed their Electoral College meetings with no "faithless" votes recorded that would deviate from public endorsements. One more state - Hawaii - casts ballots later in the day and is expected to add four more points to Biden's tally. It takes 270 electoral votes out of 538 available to become US President.

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UPDATE - Biden Leads Trump 240-232 After Electors Vote in 47 US States, Capital - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Joe Biden leads President Donald Trump with 240 to 232 as more US states cast their electoral votes in the 2020 presidential election.

According to the CNN tally, 47 states and the District of Columbia have completed their Electoral College meetings with no "faithless" voters recorded. Three more states are to hold votes later on Monday.

Trump received the electoral votes from Alabama (9), Alaska (3), Arkansas (6), Florida (29), Idaho (4), Indiana (11), Iowa (6), Kansas (6), Kentucky (8), Louisiana (8) Mississippi (6), Missouri (10), Montana (3), North Carolina (15), North Dakota (3), Ohio (18) Oklahoma (7), South Carolina (9), South Dakota (3), Tennessee (11), Texas (38), Utah (6), West Virginia (5), and Wyoming (3).

Electors in Arizona (11), Colorado (9), Connecticut (7), Delaware (3), District of Columbia (3), Georgia (16), Illinois (20), Maryland (10), Massachusetts (11) Michigan (16), Minnesota (10), Nevada (6), New Hampshire (4), New Jersey (14), New Mexico (5), New York (29), Pennsylvania (20), Rhode Island (4), Vermont (3), Virginia (13), Washington (12), and Wisconsin (10) gave the states electoral votes to Biden.

Three votes from Maine went to Biden and one to Trump. Nebraska, another state allowed to split its electoral slate, added four votes to Trump and one to Biden.

Electors were appointed in advance by both major political parties from acting and retired officials or aspiring politicians, like former President Bill Clinton in New York, Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers or Georgia gubernatorial ex-candidate Stacey Abrams.

Thirty-two states and the District of Columbia have passed laws requiring electors to vote for the popular-vote winner.

Each elector casts two paper ballots - one for President and another one for Vice President. Votes are then tallied and sent to the US Congress for verification at a joint session presided over by the incumbent Vice President Mike Pence on January 6.

Lawmakers in US Congress can raise objections when lawmakers meet to count the Electoral college results on their accord and force a recount by state delegation.

Trump has said he won the election but victory has been stolen via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump has sought recounts and filed lawsuits in state and federal courts and his campaign team has said the election is still in dispute.

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Texas Presidential Electors Cast 38 Votes for Trump - Official Results

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Members of the Electoral College in the US state of Texas officially awarded 38 votes to President Donald Trump, mirroring its popular choice. Texas is the second largest prize of the campaign, second only to California. Trump trails his Democratic rival Joe Biden 240-229 after 46 states and the District of Columbia completed their Electoral College meetings with no "faithless" votes recorded that would deviate from public endorsements. Four more states are to hold votes later on Monday, including California which is expected to elevate Biden beyond a victory threshold of 270.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik)

US SANCTIONS AGAINST TURKEY

- * The United States has imposed sanctions on the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries and its head Ismail Demir as well as on three additional individuals over Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 system, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Monday.
- * The United States is calling on Turkey to solve the matter concerning the procurement of S-400 promptly and in coordination with Washington, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said following the announcement of new sanctions against Ankara.
- * The Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned the latest US sanctions in connection with the purchase of S-400 by Ankara and announced reciprocal steps.

* The US sanctions against Turkey over purchase of were not surprising, this is another manifestation of an arrogant attitude toward international law and arbitrary illegitimate measures, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

COVID-19-RELATED MEASURES

- * The Netherlands will go into general lockdown for five weeks through January 19, Prime Minister Mark Rutte announced on Monday.

* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the introduction of a round-the-clock curfew in Turkey for the New Year holidays, from 9 p.m. on December 31 to 5 a.m. on January 4.

* Vaccination against the novel coronavirus has begun in Canada with the first shot being administered in the province of Ontario, Premier Doug Ford said.

* London and other parts of south east England will move on Wednesday into Tier 3, the highest level of the COVID-19 alert system implemented by the UK government to try to stop the spread of the pandemic, the health minister, Matt Hancock said.

* New York on Monday became the first US state to administer the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine in the United States after a nurse was inoculated with the drug following its approval by the federal government for emergency use.

CYBER ATTACKS AGAINST US government

* The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is looking into cyber breaches that have occurred across the federal government, DHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Alexei Woltornist said in a statement on Monday.

* Russia has nothing to do with alleged cyberattacks on the US Department of Treasury, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

ELECTORAL COLLEGE IN US

* The US state of Wisconsin on Monday gave its 10 electoral votes to Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden reaffirming the popular vote in the state.

* Electors from Pennsylvania and Arizona, the key battleground states and focal points of US President Donald Trump's bid to reverse his re-election defeat, confirmed Biden's victory in the presidential race.

* Georgia, a key battleground state and a focal point of Trump's bid to overturn his re-election defeat, has officially awarded its 16 electoral votes to Biden.

* Nevada, a key battleground state and a focal point of Trump's bid to overturn his election defeat, has officially awarded its six electoral votes to Biden.

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Hunter Biden Fails to Report \$400,000 in Income Received From Ukraine's Burisma - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden has failed to report some \$400,000 in income that he received from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma Holdings, Fox News reported on Monday.

Biden did not report approximately \$400,000 in income he collected after joining the Burisma board of directors in 2014, the report said citing a memorandum detailing his income during the 2013-17 period from an email the news network said it obtained.

The email was sent to Biden from the then president of his company Rosemont Seneca, Eric Scherwin.

"In 2014, you joined the Burisma board and we still need to amend your 2014 returns to reflect the unreported Burisma income," Scherwin wrote in the email to Biden. "That is approximately \$400,000 extra so your income in 2014 was closer to \$1,247,328."

US President Donald Trump is seeking to appoint a special counsel that will investigate the ongoing claims of fraud in the November presidential election and allegations surrounding projected President-elect Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, according to media reports.

On Wednesday, Hunter Biden announced that the US Attorney's Office in Delaware is investigating his tax affairs. A source also told the Fox News that the investigation will cover Biden's alleged dealings with China as well.

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Biden Leads Trump 202-177 After Electors Voted in 40 US States, Capital - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Joe Biden leads President Donald Trump 202 to 177 as more US states cast electoral votes after the 2020 presidential election.

According to the CNN tally, 40 states and the District of Columbia have completed their Electoral College meetings with no "faithless" electors recorded that would deviate from public endorsements. Ten more states are to hold votes later on Monday.

Trump received the electoral votes from Alabama (9), Alaska (3), Arkansas (6), Florida (29), Idaho (4), Indiana (11), Iowa (6), Kansas (6), Kentucky (8), Louisiana (8), Mississippi (6), North Carolina (15), North Dakota (3), Ohio (18), Oklahoma (7), South Carolina (9), South Dakota (3), Tennessee (11), Utah (6), West Virginia (5), and Wyoming (3).

Biden received the electoral votes of Arizona (11), Colorado (9), Connecticut (7), Delaware (3), District of Columbia (3), Georgia (16), Illinois (20), Maryland (10), Michigan (16), Minnesota (10), Nevada (6), New Hampshire (4), New Mexico (5), New York (29), Pennsylvania (20), Rhode Island (4), Vermont (3), Virginia (13), Wisconsin (10).

Three electoral votes from the state of Maine went to Biden and one to Trump.

Each elector casts two paper ballots - one for President and another one for Vice President. Votes are then tallied and sent to the US Congress for verification at a joint session presided over by the incumbent Vice President Mike Pence on January 6.

Federal lawmakers can raise objections, but it would take a bicameral majority for the dissenting opinion to matter, an unlikely outcome with the Democratic-led House of Representatives and the Senate controlled by the Republicans.

Trump has said he won the election, but victory was snatched from him via massive election and voter fraud as well as acts of impropriety. Trump has sought recounts in several states and launched lawsuits in state and federal courts and maintains that the election is still disputed.

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US COVID-19-Related Death Toll Surpasses 300,000 - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The death toll from the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the United States has surpassed 300,000, John Hopkins University data showed on Monday.

The country added more than 10,000 new fatalities in only in four days, the data showed. US authorities have reported that more than 16.351 million people have tested positive for the novel coronavirus since the beginning of pandemic, according to the data, and the death toll now stands at 300,267.

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US Homeland Security Acknowledges Cyber Breaches Across Federal Govt - Assistant Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is looking into cyber breaches that have occurred across the federal government, DHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Alexei Woltornist said in a statement on Monday.

"The Department of Homeland Security is aware of cyber breaches across the federal government and working closely with our partners in the public and private sector on the federal response," Woltornist said.

US officials believe the hackers are allegedly part of a Russian intelligence campaign targeting multiple American agencies and the cybersecurity company FireEye, media reported.

The Russian Embassy in the United States said US media reports accusing Russian hackers for the recent cyber attacks are unfounded.

On Sunday, US media reported that a hacking group allegedly backed by a foreign government had stolen data from the Treasury Department and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

The hackers reportedly got access by compromising the Texas-based SolarWinds software. The company provides remote information technology services around the world, including several US government agencies and the military.

The Washington Post reported that a hacking group called APT29, also known as "the Dukes" or "Cozy Bear," allegedly linked to the Russian government, was likely behind the hacking but provided no proof for its claims.

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Battleground Michigan Confirms Biden's Win in Electoral Vote

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Michigan handed its 16 electoral votes to Joe Biden joining other key battleground states in reaffirming the Democratic presidential candidate's victory over the Republican incumbent Donald Trump.

Electors in Michigan mirrored the popular choice like their colleagues in 36 other states and the District of Columbia that already have completed Electoral College meetings with no "faithless" votes recorded so far.

Other battleground states and focal points of Trump's bid to overturn his defeat include Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Arizona, Nevada, and Georgia. They all awarded electoral votes to Biden who currently leads 199 to 167.

Overall, 538 electors are to vote on Monday in 50 US states and the District of Columbia. Biden is expected to receive 306 votes - way above the victory threshold of 270 - with Trump getting the remaining 232 endorsements.

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Biden Leads Trump 183-167 After Electors' Vote in 33 US States - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Democratic nominee Joe Biden leads President Donald Trump 183 to 167 after 32 US states so far cast electoral votes on Monday, CNN reported.

There have been no "faithless" electors in the 33 states that completed their Electoral College meetings, the report said. Eighteen more states and the District of Columbia will hold their meeting to cast electoral votes later on Monday.

Thirty-two states and the District of Columbia have passed laws requiring electors to give the electoral votes according for the popular-vote.

Each elector casts two paper ballots - one for President and another one for Vice President - and then votes are tallied and sent to the US Congress for verification at a joint session presided over by the incumbent Vice President Mike Pence on January 6.

Federal lawmakers can raise objections, but it would take a bicameral majority for the dissenting opinion to matter.

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Wisconsin Supreme Court Throws Out Trump Campaign's Bid to Invalidate Ballots - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The Wisconsin Supreme Court has rejected the Trump campaign's bid to invalidate a substantial number of what it called illegal ballots that would overturn President-elect Joe Biden's victory in the battleground state, a court document revealed on Monday.

"We conclude the Campaign is not entitled to the relief it seeks. The challenge to the indefinitely confined voter ballots is meritless on its face, and the other three categories of ballots challenged fail under the doctrine of laches," the court document said.

Earlier in the day, the Wisconsin electors gave the states ten electoral votes to Biden.

Trump has said he won the 2020 presidential election but victory was stolen from him via massive voter and election fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump has sought relief by demanding recounts in several states and launched lawsuits in state and federal courts.

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Georgia Republicans Hold Alternative Electoral Vote for Trump

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Republicans in the US state of Georgia held an alternative electoral vote for the incumbent President Donald Trump in a symbolic gesture to challenge the Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's win in their state since the election is still disputed, state Republican leader David Shafer said on Monday.

"Because the President's lawsuit contesting the Georgia election is still pending, the Republican nominees for Presidential Elector met today at noon at the State Capitol today and cast their votes for President and Vice President," Shafer said via Twitter.

Georgia is a focal point of Trump's bid to legally challenge what he has called a massive election and voter fraud. The official slate of Georgia's electors was formed by the Democrats and it reaffirmed Biden's victory.

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US Homeland Security Acknowledges Cyber Breaches Across Federal Govt - Assistant Secretary

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"The Department of Homeland Security is aware of cyber breaches across the federal government and working closely with our partners in the public and private sector on the federal response," Woltornist said.

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US Did Not Coordinate With EU Imposing Sanctions Against Turkey - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States did not coordinate with the European Union the newly imposed sanctions against Turkey, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia Matthew Palmer told reporters on Monday.

Earlier in the day, the US Department of the Treasury announced sanctions on the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries and its head Ismail Demir as well as on three additional individuals over Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 system.

"We've certainly been talking to... representatives of the European Union about potential EU sanctions but we haven't coordinated this announcement with Europeans," Palmer said.

Palmer explained the European Union would not expect coordinating something which is considered to be a unilateral US decision made in accordance with its national laws just as the United States does not have a "vote" in the European Union's sanctions regime.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries, 4 Officials - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries and its head Ismail Demir as well as on three additional individuals over Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 system, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Monday.

All the designated individuals, including Mustafa Deniz, Serhat Gencoglu and Faruk Yigit are related to Presidency of Defense Industries, the statement said.

"Today, the United States is imposing sanctions on the Republic of Turkey's Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB) pursuant to Section 231 of the CAATSA for knowingly engaging in a significant transaction with Rosoboronexport, Russia's main arms export entity, by procuring the S-400 surface-to-air missile system," US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a separate statement.

The United States has made it clear to Turkey at the highest level that acquiring the S-400 from Russia would endanger US military technologies and personnel, while providing substantial funds to Russia, Pompeo said.

"Turkey nevertheless decided to move ahead with the procurement and testing of the S-400, despite the availability of alternative, NATO-interoperable systems to meet its defense

requirements," Pompeo said. "This decision resulted in Turkey's suspension and pending removal from the global F-35 Joint Strike Fighter partnership."

Pompeo pointed out that the United States is sending a clear signal about its commitment to fully implement US law and to remain intolerant to significant transactions with Russia's defense and intelligence sectors.

The US secretary of state urged Turkey to immediately resolve what he called is a "S-400 problem" in coordination with the United States.

Turkey opted to purchase the S-400 from Russia in 2017 after negotiations to acquire the US Patriot system broke down due to disagreements between the two countries over technology transfers.

The US responded to the delivery of the first batch of S-400 batteries by removing Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet program on the grounds that Russia could use the air defense system to gather information on the advanced capabilities of the US aircraft.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said last week that US sanctions against his country over its purchase of S-400 show the United States' disrespect toward an important NATO ally.

Pompeo noted in his statement that the United States continues to consider Turkey to be an important ally.

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Wisconsin Electors Give Joe Biden State's 10 Electoral Votes

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US state of Wisconsin on Monday gave its 10 electoral votes to Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden reaffirming the popular vote in the state.

Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers announced the results, which mirrored that of the electors vote in 21 other US states - including the battleground states of Pennsylvania, Arizona, Nevada and Georgia – that completed their Electoral College meetings earlier in the day.

Biden leads Trump 146 to 97 after the electors in Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Wisconsin gave their votes.

Overall, 538 electors will vote on Monday in the 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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Pompeo Urges Turkey to Resolve S-400 Problem 'Immediately' in Coordination With US

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on Turkey to solve the matter concerning the procurement of Russia's S-400 missile defense systems promptly and in coordination with Washington, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Monday following the announcement of new sanctions against Ankara.

"I also urge Turkey to resolve the S-400 problem immediately in coordination with the United States," Pompeo said. "Turkey is a valued Ally and an important regional security partner for the United States, and we seek to continue our decades-long history of productive defense-sector cooperation by removing the obstacle of Turkey's S-400 possession as soon as possible."

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US Imposes Sanctions on Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries, 4 Officials - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 10 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on the Turkish Presidency of Defense Industries and its head Ismail Demir as well as on three additional individuals over Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 system, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Monday.

All the designated individuals, including Mustafa Deniz, Serhat Gencoglu and Faruk Yigit are related to Presidency of Defense Industries, the statement said.

"Today, the United States is imposing sanctions on the Republic of Turkey's Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB) pursuant to Section 231 of the CAATSA for knowingly engaging in a significant transaction with Rosoboronexport, Russia's main arms export entity, by procuring the S-400 surface-to-air missile system," US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a separate statement.

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Battleground States of Pennsylvania, Arizona Confirm Biden's Win in Electoral Vote

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Electors from Pennsylvania and Arizona, the key battleground states and focal points of US President Donald Trump's bid to reverse his re-election defeat, confirmed Joe Biden's victory in the presidential race.

By handing Biden 20 and 11 endorsements, respectively, Pennsylvania and Arizona mirrored their popular vote like the 15 other states that already completed their Electoral College meetings.

Biden leads Trump 119 to 56 after Pennsylvania, Arizona, Connecticut, New York, Georgia, Arkansas, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and Vermont cast their electoral votes.

Overall, 538 electors will vote on Monday in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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Acting Defense Chief Announces New Additions to Pentagon's Policy Board - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller in a statement on Monday announced the addition of eight new members to the Defense Policy Board.

"Today, I'm proud to announce the addition of these eight new members to the Department's Defense Policy Board," Miller said. "These incoming members bring extensive defense and national security affairs experience to this advisory committee from their time in Congress, the State Department, our armed forces and beyond. I'm confident the Department of Defense will benefit greatly from their time and service to the board."

The new members of the Defense Policy Board include former US House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich, Thomas Carter, Edward Luttwak, Scott O'Grady, Thomas Stewart, Randy Forbes, Charles Glazer and Robert Smith.

The board is tasked with providing the Defense Secretary and Deputy Defense Secretary independent advice and recommendations related to defense policy.

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Battleground Georgia Confirms Biden's Win in Electoral Vote

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Georgia, a key battleground state and a focal point of US President Donald Trump's bid to overturn his re-election defeat, has officially awarded its 16 electoral votes to the Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

Georgia electors mirrored the popular vote like 12 other states, including Nevada, another closely watched locality, that have already completed their Electoral College meetings.

Electors in Georgia voted in a roll call with the result announced by the state's leading Democratic activist Stacy Abrams.

Trump has received 56 while Biden has gotten 52 endorsements so far after votes in Georgia, Arkansas, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and Vermont.

Overall, 538 electors are to vote on Monday in 50 US states and the District of Columbia. Biden is expected to receive 306 votes - way above the victory threshold of 270 - with Trump getting the remaining 232 endorsements.

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US Sanctions 2 Iranian Intel Officials Over Levinson's Presumed Death - Senior Officials

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing sanctions against two Iranian intelligence officers over their alleged role in the disappearance and probable death of former FBI agent Robert Levinson, a senior US government officials said in a conference call with reporters on Monday.

"Today, the Department of Treasury is going to announce designations on two Iranian intelligence officers from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security for the direct involvement in the abduction, detention and probable death of Robert Levinson," the senior government official said.

The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a formal notice that sanctions would be imposed on Mohammad Baseri and Ahmad Khazai, who are alleged to be high-ranking officers of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security.

The imposed sanctions allow the seizure of all assets in the United States owned by the designated individuals and US citizens are forbidden to enter into transactions with them.

A second senior government official expressed hope that the public outing of the two alleged Iranian officers will spur individuals to come forward with information about Levinson's disappearance.

The US government has issued a \$20 million reward for any act that directly leads to justice in the case and an additional \$5 million for providing important information related to the case.

The senior US official emphasized that no future agreement with Tehran should ever be negotiated if all Americans held in Iran are not released.

Evidence in the possession of US authorities points Iran embarked on a campaign of disinformation to conceal his death, the senior official added.

The White House said in a statement that the United States will "relentlessly pursue all others involved as the investigation continues."

Levinson retired from the FBI in 1998 but was believed to be in Iran on a CIA mission when he disappeared in March 2007. Iranian authorities have repeatedly denied having detained Levinson and maintain that the government in Tehran has no knowledge of his whereabouts.

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Early Voting Begins for Key US Senate Races in State of Georgia - Governor

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Early in-person voting has begun for two US Senate races in the state of Georgia, Governor Brian Kemp said in a statement on Monday.

"Advance voting for the January 5th Run-Off Election is underway and it's time to Get Out The Vote for Senators Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue," Kemp said via Twitter.

Democrats must win both Senate races if they want to control the upper chamber of Congress. Two victories on January 5th would split the Senate 50-50 and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, once sworn in, would become the president of the chamber, giving her the tie-breaking vote.

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Seven US States Cast Electoral Votes for President

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Electors in the first seven US states on Monday have cast their votes that mirrored the states' popular vote.

According to a CNN tally, after Electoral College meetings in Indiana, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Tennessee, Vermont, Oklahoma and Illinois, incumbent President Donald Trump was given 35 electoral votes and his Democratic rival Joe Biden was given 27 electoral votes. Overall, the 538 electors are to vote on Monday in the 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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US Battleground Nevada Confirms Biden's Win in Electoral Vote

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Nevada, a key battleground state and a focal point of US President Donald Trump's bid to overturn his election defeat, has officially awarded its six electoral votes to the Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

Nevada electors mirrored the popular vote like 11 other states that have already finished their Electoral College meetings.

Trump and Biden have received 56 and 36 endorsements respectively so far, after electoral votes in Arkansas, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Vermont had been cast.

Overall, the 538 electors are to vote on Monday in 50 US states and the District of Columbia. Biden is expected to receive 306 votes - way above the victory threshold of 270 - with Trump getting the remaining 232 endorsements.

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Michigan State Lawmaker Removed From Committee Over Threats of Violence - Speaker

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - A Republican state lawmaker in Michigan was removed from the committees he is a part of because of threats of violence he hinted related to the Electoral College meeting set to take place later on Monday, Michigan House speaker Lee Chatfield said in a statement.

"We as elected officials must be clear that violence has no place in our democratic process," Chatfield said. "We must be held to a higher standard. Because of that, Rep. [Gary] Eisen has been removed from his committee assignments for the rest of the term."

Earlier on Monday, Eisen hinted during a radio interview that he was part of a group that would try to disrupt the Electoral College vote later this afternoon.

Chatfield noted that Democrat state lawmaker Cynthia Johnson was also removed from committees last due to warnings against supporters of President Donald Trump that implied violence.

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Thousands of Africa Migrants at Risk as EU Program Runs Out of Funds - IOM

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Thousands of migrants fleeing from West and Central Africa are at risk as critical funding from the European Union for humanitarian operations comes to an end, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said in a press release from Dakar on Monday.

"The International Organization for Migration is appealing for 100 million euros (\$121 million) to continue providing urgent protection and critical assistance to vulnerable migrants from West and Central Africa along the Central and Western Mediterranean routes, as funding under the EU Trust Fund (EUTF) comes to an end," the release said.

IOM Director General Antonio Vitorino said in the release that the end of the program and the funding shortfall raise deep concerns about the fates of tens of thousands of vulnerable men, women and children.

"Through the EU-IOM Joint Initiative, we have been able to assist over 100,000 migrants who might otherwise have been left in conditions of great peril; in detention centers, stranded and left for dead in deserts, or living in extremely difficult environments conducive to trafficking and smuggling," Vitorino said.

Launched in December 2016, under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration involves 26 African countries in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions, the Horn of Africa and North Africa. Since its launch, 77,000 West and Central Africa nationals have been helped, the release said.

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US Sanctions 2 Iranian Intel Officials Over Levinson's Presumed Death - Senior Officials

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – The United States is imposing sanctions against two Iranian intelligence officers over their alleged role in the disappearance and probable death of former FBI agent Robert Levinson, senior government officials said in a conference call with reporters on Monday.

"Today, the Department of Treasury is going to announce designations on two Iranian intelligence officers from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security for the direct involvement in the abduction, detention and probable death of Robert Levinson," a senior government official said.

The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) later published a formal notice indicating that sanctions would be imposed on Mohammad Baseri and Ahmad Khazai, alleged to be members of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security.

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US Condemns Iranian Journalist's Execution - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States denounces Iran's recent execution of Iranian dissident journalist Ruhollah Zam, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a Twitter statement on Monday.

"The US strongly condemns Iran's unjust, barbaric execution of Ruhollah Zam, an Iranian journalist kidnapped abroad by the regime," Pompeo said. "Zam exposed the brutality and corruption of the regime, which has killed or arrested more than 860 journalists in its 41-year reign of terror."

On Saturday, Zam, who founded and ran the anti-government Amad News website and Telegram channel, was executed in Iran over accusations of fueling mass anti-government protests in 2017-2018.

In October 2019, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps arrested the Paris-based journalist. Zam was sentenced to death in June 2020. He was accused of working with French and Israeli intelligence agents against Iran and attempting to destabilize the situation in the country by encouraging mass anti-government protests on social media in 2017.

The nationwide rallies in Iran began in December 2017 and continued through January 2018 over what protesters called weak economic policies of the Iranian government and a spike in food prices. According to various media reports, hundreds were arrested during the unrest.

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US Electoral College Convened to Formally Seal Biden's Victory

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US Electoral College started gathering on Monday across the country to cast their votes in one of the last procedural milestones of the presidential race, which is set to reaffirm President-elect Joe Biden's win.

Mirroring the popular choices of their states, the 538 electors are expected to hand the Democratic candidate 306 votes - far above the victory threshold of 270 - with the Republican incumbent Donald Trump getting the remaining 232 endorsements. Electoral College meetings are taking place in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Electors were appointed in advance by both main parties and include acting and retired officials or aspiring politicians, such as former President Bill Clinton in New York, Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers and Georgia former gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams.

Those who pledged for the Republican incumbent meet in capitals of states carried by Trump, while Biden's electors are summoned for voting where the Democratic candidate emerged victorious, as per a certified popular tally. Moreover, in 32 states and the District of Columbia, local laws explicitly require electors to vote for the popular-vote winner, an arrangement upheld by the Supreme Court in July.

Each elector casts two paper ballots - one for President and the other one for Vice President. Votes are then tallied and sent to US Congress for verification at a joint session presided over by the incumbent Vice President Mike Pence on January 6.

Federal lawmakers can raise objections, but it would take a bicameral majority for the dissenting opinion to matter, an unlikely outcome with the Democratic-led House of Representatives and the Senate controlled by Republicans.

While Biden is already widely referred to as president-elect and busy with the transition, Trump refuses to concede and disputes the validity of the election, accusing his rivals of massive fraud. Trump's bid to overturn his defeat suffered a major setback last Friday, when the US Supreme Court rejected a lawsuit seeking to bar Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, whose votes tipped the scales in favor of Biden, from participating in the Electoral College.

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Sudan's Removal From US Blacklist Represents Fundamental Change in Bilateral Ties - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The formal removal of Sudan from the US State Sponsors of Terrorism list heralds a crucial change in bilateral ties between the two nations, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Monday.

Earlier in the day, the US Embassy in Khartoum announced that Pompeo had signed a notification to formally take Sudan off its list of terror sponsors, and that the decision entered into force starting December 14.

"Today, Sudan's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism is officially rescinded," Pompeo said. "This represents a fundamental change in our bilateral relationship toward greater collaboration and support for Sudan's historic democratic transition."

Pompeo emphasized that the removal was achieved thanks to the efforts of Sudan's civilian-led transitional government to adapt a completely new course.

"We commend the calls of the Sudanese people for freedom, peace, and justice, and we congratulate the members of the civilian-led transitional government for their courage in advancing the aspirations of the citizens they serve," Pompeo added.

Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok said on Monday that the exclusion of his country from the US' State Sponsors of Terrorism list (SSTL) would unlock numerous opportunities for the future development, as Khartoum had officially "rejoined" the global community.

The prime minister noted that the removal from the blacklist would help Sudan release from the international and global blockade.

The African nation was blacklisted back in 1993 for sheltering Osama bin Laden for nearly five years at a time when al-Qaeda terrorist group (banned in Russia) leader was involved in attacks on targets in the United States.

Four year later, Washington imposed sanctions against Khartoum that limited the ability of Sudanese banks to work with foreign partners.

A breakthrough in relations between the US and Sudan was achieved in August 2019, when new Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok announced the start of negotiations with Washington on removing Khartoum from the blacklist. The improvement of ties occurred after Sudan established the Sovereign Council, officially dissolving the Transitional Military Council, which came to power after former President Omar Bashir was overthrown in April.

In late October, Sudan and Israel reached an agreement to establish full diplomatic relations between the two nations.

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Canadian Official Says Coronavirus Vaccine Makers Shielded From Liability

TORONTO, December 14 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus vaccine makers are shielded from legal liability in Canada, Public Services and Procurement Minister Anita Anand told reporters.

"Yes, we are," Anand said on Monday, when asked if the Canadian government is including indemnification clauses in contracts signed with the vaccine manufacturers.

Anand explained that such clauses are standard when new technologies are introduced and that other countries are grappling with the same issue.

The minister said government's newly minted federal vaccine support program was created to mitigate any unintended adverse effects of vaccines, including the coronavirus vaccine.

Concerns remain about the safety of the vaccine as critics allege the approval process was expedited under pressure from the opposition and the media.

Canadian officials have backed the approval decision, saying that the review process was rigorous and no shortcuts were taken.

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Canada to Contribute \$380Mln for Global Distribution of COVID-19 Therapeutics - Minister

TORONTO, December 14 (Sputnik) - Canada will contribute \$380 million toward distributing therapeutics, tests and vaccines against the novel coronavirus in developing nations, Minister of International Development Karina Gould told reporters on Monday.

"Canada's investment of \$485 million [\$380 million USD], being announced today, will reinforce the work of key partners and build on our commitment to make COVID-19 medical countermeasures more accessible for all countries," Gould said.

The biggest portion of the new funding - \$180.2 million - will go toward supplying developing nations with treatments against the deadly disease through the World Health Organization's Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, the minister said.

The funding is on top of \$677.71 million committed to date, according to a Canadian government press release.

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Canada Administers First Doses of Coronavirus Vaccine in Ontario - Premier

TORONTO, December 14 (Sputnik) - Vaccination against the novel coronavirus has begun in Canada with the first shot being administered in the province of Ontario, Premier Doug Ford said in a statement on Monday.

"Today is a historic day for Ontario and for Canada as the first Health Canada-approved COVID-19 vaccines have started to be given to our frontline health care heroes," Ford said. Canada's first inoculation against the coronavirus was administered to Anita Quidangen, a personal support worker in a long-term care home in Toronto, the premier said.

Canada is expected receive up to 249,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech before the end of December, which will allow up to 124,500 Canadians to be vaccinated before the end of the year, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said last week.

Public health officials say the plan is to vaccinate 40 to 50 percent of Canadians by next summer and complete the COVID-19 immunization program by September 30, 2021.

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